



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
**WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM**

BILL NUMBER: <b>SB 66</b>		DATE: <b>4/1/2025</b>	
COMMITTEE: <b>Children and Families</b>			
TESTIFYING: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>ALEX GOYETTE</b>		PHONE NUMBER: <b>571-550-9163</b>	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: <b>TAHIRIH JUSTICE CENTER</b>		TITLE: <b>PUBLIC POLICY MANAGER</b>	
ADDRESS: <b>6400 ARLINGTON BLVD, SUITE 400</b>			
CITY: <b>FALLS CHURCH</b>		STATE: <b>VA</b>	ZIP: <b>22042</b>
EMAIL: <b>alexg@tahirih.org</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>Written</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/31/2025 1:04 PM</b>	

**THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.**

Chair Coleman, Vice Chair Bailey, and Distinguished Committee Members: The Tahirih Justice Center (Tahirih) is a national legal advocacy and direct services organization, founded in 1997, that has assisted over 25,000 survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, and other abuses. Tahirih has unique legal and policy expertise in forced and child marriage as U.S. problems. Through Tahirih’s Forced Marriage Initiative, launched in 2011, we have worked on several hundred cases involving women and girls nationwide from all backgrounds. Tahirih has also compiled extensive research on child marriage in the United States, including a 50-state statutory compilation, an in-depth report that compares and analyzes all states’ minimum marriage age laws and exceptions, a compilation of stories from survivors’ of child marriage in the United States, and a policy brief reflecting on progress made in the national movement to end child marriage since 2016. We submit this testimony in strong support of SB 66. This important measure would update current law which allows individuals under the age of 18 to be married with parental consent and would set a minimum age for marriage at 18 without exceptions. Unfortunately, current law does not do enough to protect Missouri’s children. SB 66 would take a simple but powerful step to protect all of Missouri’s children from the devastating harms of child marriage by making the legal minimum marriage age the same as the legal age of adulthood (age 18). The reforms proposed by SB 66 will accomplish three critical commonsense objectives—preventing forced marriages of children; ensuring that both parties to a marriage are fully empowered to protect themselves from abuse; and preventing early marriages that put children at acute risk of immediate and lifelong harm. Forced marriages can happen in America for many reasons. They can arise in families and communities where parents expect to control the marriage choices of their children, and where marrying young is the norm. Some individuals are pushed to marry to prevent or address sex or pregnancy outside of marriage, or as a cover-up for rape or sexual abuse. Sometimes, an abusive dating partner will threaten or coerce an individual into marriage. In other cases, sexual predators can target, “groom,” and then pressure vulnerable minors to marry them in order to further isolate and control them and to have round-the-clock access to them without fear of accountability or prosecution. Children can also be compelled to marry when poor, abusive, or neglectful parents try to offload them onto others. Some parents even seek to gain financially from such arrangements. While both adults and children can face forced marriages, children are especially susceptible to coercion, and particularly disempowered to advocate for themselves because of their legal status as minors. Many “escape routes” available to adults are closed, or much more challenging to access, for minors. Even when minors do make a report, it may get them nowhere, or even make matters worse for them. In Tahirih’s experience across the country, child protective services typically fails to investigate forced marriage allegations, considering it outside their mandate, or does not take appropriate action. This can subject a girl to retaliation for reaching out, causing her to rescind her

appeal for help and making it more difficult for advocates to work with her as perpetrators monitor her more closely or may expedite the marriage. In addition to addressing these concerns about forced marriages of children, SB 66 will ensure that both parties to genuine marriages will be on equal legal footing with each other, rather than leaving a minor party at such a harsh disadvantage in the relationship. Of equal importance, the bill will also spare girls from the domino effects of marrying under the age of 18, which can dramatically heighten their vulnerability to abuse. Up to 80% of marriages involving someone under 18 ends in divorce. And we know from U.S. based research that the devastating truth is that teen mothers who marry and later divorce can be made worse-off long-term—more than twice as likely to live in future poverty—than teen mothers who do not marry. Most states now recognize that a pregnant teen may need lots of different resources and loving community support, but marrying is unfortunately likely to do more harm than good. Women who marry as teens are more likely to have more children overall and to do so more quickly, to drop out of school, to have fewer work opportunities, and to wind up poor. They also experience more medical and mental health problems, both short- and long-term. All this can increase their dependence and limit their options in the event of domestic violence or divorce. This harsh reality has even compelled religious leaders in multiple states to come out in support of legislation to end child marriage in the U.S. given the power of such legislation to prevent the trafficking and exploitation of children as well as the negative consequences of divorce. Father Reginald Whitt of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Washington, and Wilmington (Maryland Catholic Conference) shared powerful testimony when he stated: “In fact, we can think of no circumstance under which the Church would encourage a person under the age of 18 to marry... It has been the constant teaching of the Catholic Church that marriage is a ‘...covenant by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses...’ The Church believes that this “covenant” is not the result of a happenstance meeting or pure chance, but rather, the result of God working in the lives of two people, bringing them together for a divine purpose according to the Almighty’s divine plan for them. [This] is a critically important measure in preventing the tragedy of young women being coerced or exploited through a marriage imposed on them against their will. It is also an important measure in preventing young people from mistakenly entering one of the most serious commitments of their lives, only to later suffer the negative consequences that the breakup of that marriage would likely have on both the partners and any children born of the marriage.” In sum, there are significant child-protection concerns inherent to every child marriage and Missouri’s current marriage age law does not do enough to prevent these harms. There is a rapidly growing national movement to overhaul antiquated minimum marriage age laws that put children at risk. Since 2016, thirteen states and Washington, D.C. have ended child marriage entirely: Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Rhode Island, New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, Michigan, Washington, Virginia, and New Hampshire. Several other states also have pending bills that, like SB 66, would ban all marriages under the age of 18. Missouri should assert its place as a leader in this historic movement by taking swift action now to advance this bill. We respectfully urge the Committee to support SB 66 to end child marriage in Missouri.



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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>INDIVIDUAL:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>ARNIE C. "HONEST-ABE" DIENOFF-STATE PUBLIC ADVOCATE</b>		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
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CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: <b>arniedienoff@yahoo.com</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>In-Person</b>		SUBMIT DATE: <b>4/1/2025 11:32 PM</b>
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**I am in Support of this Bill and the Requirement that you must be 18-Years of age to be legally married under State Law.**



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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>REGISTERED LOBBYIST:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>BECCA POWELL</b>		PHONE NUMBER: <b>610-291-5696</b>	
REPRESENTING: <b>UNCHAINED AT LAST</b>		TITLE: <b>DIRECTOR OF ADVOCACY AND OUTREACH</b>	
ADDRESS: <b>208 LENOX AVE., #189</b>			
CITY: <b>WESTFIELD</b>		STATE: <b>NJ</b>	ZIP: <b>07090</b>
EMAIL: <b>becca@unchainedatlast.org</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>In-Person</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/28/2025 3:13 PM</b>	
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Testimony in Support of SB66 Presented to the Missouri House Committee on Children and Families



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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>INDIVIDUAL:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>BRANDI DREDGE</b>		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: <b>brandi@brandidredge.com</b>		ATTENDANCE: <b>In-Person</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/28/2025 6:17 PM</b>
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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>DENISE SYLVESTER</b>		PHONE NUMBER: <b>989-808-5494</b>	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: <b>ZONTA USA CAUCUS</b>		TITLE: <b>CONVENER</b>	
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CITY: <b>OAK BROOK</b>		STATE: <b>IL</b>	ZIP: <b>60523</b>
EMAIL: <b>Denise.L.Sylvester@gmail.com</b>		ATTENDANCE: <b>Written</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/31/2025 11:27 PM</b>

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Dear Chair Carter, Vice Chair Nicola, and Distinguished Committee Members:As Zonta International builds a better world for women and girls, Zonta USA, comprised of 800 clubs across the USA, and three Zonta Clubs in Missouri, including St. Louis, Jefferson City and Capers Girardeau, is working across the nation, state by state to end child marriage. We ask you to end child marriage in Missouri, a non-partisan issue. Marriage is a serious legal contract, and we believe that it should be reserved for those who have reached the age of majority and have full access to all rights bestowed upon them at the age of majority.We are part of the National Coalition to End Child Marriage, led by Unchained at Last, and we have been educating the public on ending child marriage along with UNICEF USA, We are very pleased you are holding a hearing on Senate bill SB66. Child marriage is an urgent problem in Missouri as children as young as 16 are allowed to marry. **LEGAL TRAP** Marriage before age 18 creates a horrific legal trap. Even highly mature teens can easily be forced, or coerced into marrying and or forced to stay in a marriage before they turn 18 and attain the rights of adulthood: Minors cannot easily escape if their parents are planning an unwanted wedding for them, because a minor who leaves home can be classified as a youth in crisis, an at-risk youth or a child in need of services.Where would minors go even if they could escape? We have found that domestic violence shelters across the U.S. routinely turn away unaccompanied minors, due to funding guidelines and/or liability concerns. Youth shelters are not a solution, because they are not confidential: They must notify the parents within 72 hours that the minor is there, or else notify the state Department of Children, Youth, and Families.Minors cannot easily retain an attorney to help them with their complex legal needs, because most contracts with children, including retainer agreements, are voidable. In our experience, lawyers are reluctant to take on minors as clients based on a voidable retainer agreement.Minors are not allowed to bring a legal action in their own name. A minor aged 16 or younger cannot seek a protective order if their spouse turns abusive. Perhaps most shockingly, a minor who marries another minor is not even allowed to file independently for divorce.Alarming Statistics in Missouri8,289 minors were married in Missouri between 2000 and 2022.78% were girls wed to adult men an average of 4.03 years older.Between 2000 and 2021, it is estimated that 900 marriages occurred with a spousal age difference that would have been considered a sex crime outside of marriage.- All this is based on Unchained's analysis of data from state and public sourcesDevastating Consequences of Child Marriage• Marriage before 18, the age of adulthood, creates a legal trap and complications. Married Minors in Missouri are not emancipated. Minors before age 18 typically may not leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, seek a personal protection order, or even independently seek a marriage annulment. Additional seeking of emancipation brings only limited rights that arrive too late, after the minor has endured the trauma of forced marriage. • Child marriage destroys girls' health, education and economic opportunities, and increases their risk of experiencing violence. • The U.S.

State Department considers child marriage, marriage before 18, child abuse and a human rights violation. • Those who marry before 18 have a 70 to 80% chance of divorcing – and teen mothers who marry and then divorce are more likely to suffer economic deprivation and instability than teen mothers who stay single. Simple Legislative Solution Pass SB 66. Zonta USA's Missouri Clubs and members encourage you to eliminate the dangerous loopholes that allow child marriage in Missouri. States and territories across the U.S., and countries around the world, are passing the same legislation to end this child abuse and human rights abuse. Learn more about the devastating consequences of child marriage here: [www.unchainedatlast.org](http://www.unchainedatlast.org) or [www.stopchildmarriages.org](http://www.stopchildmarriages.org) Zonta USA engages in non-partisan advocacy to build a better world for women and girls. You can make a difference in the lives of children by ending child marriage. #18NoExceptions Sincerely, Zonta USA Caucus Including: Zonta Club of St. Louis Zonta Club of Cape Girardeau Zonta club of Jefferson City, MO



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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>		
<b>REGISTERED LOBBYIST:</b>		
WITNESS NAME: <b>DRE FIELDS</b>		PHONE NUMBER: <b>908-481-4673</b>
REPRESENTING: <b>UNCHAINED AT LAST</b>		TITLE: <b>ADVOCACY MANAGER</b>
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CITY: <b>WESTFIELD</b>		STATE: <b>NJ</b>
		ZIP: <b>07090</b>
EMAIL: <b>admin@unchainedatlast.org</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>In-Person</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/28/2025 3:16 PM</b>

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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>INDIVIDUAL:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>HOLLY THOMPSON REHDER</b>		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL:	ATTENDANCE:	SUBMIT DATE: <b>4/1/2025 12:00 AM</b>	
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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>		
<b>REGISTERED LOBBYIST:</b>		
WITNESS NAME: <b>JESSICA PETRIE</b>		PHONE NUMBER: <b>573-635-6092</b>
REPRESENTING: <b>MO NETWORK AGAINST CHILD ABUSE</b>		TITLE:
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CITY: <b>JEFFERSON CITY</b>		STATE: <b>MO</b>
		ZIP: <b>65102</b>
EMAIL: <b>jessica@wintonpolicygroup.com</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>In-Person</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>4/1/2025 9:26 AM</b>
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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>		
<b>INDIVIDUAL:</b>		
WITNESS NAME: <b>KAREN GILLIAM</b>		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE:      ZIP:
EMAIL: <b>mommag3821@icloud.com</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>Written</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/31/2025 4:03 PM</b>
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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>INDIVIDUAL:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>LAUREN A VAN WAGONER</b>		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: <b>laurenvanwagoner@gmail.com</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>In-Person</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/31/2025 11:08 AM</b>	

**THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.**

At 17, I was forced into marriage by my mother to protect my now ex-husband from excommunication from the Mormon Church. At that young age, his eternal salvation was placed on my shoulders. I remember every detail of that November day. I went to school that morning because I had a research paper due in first period. Then my mother checked me out of school, and we drove from rural Alabama to Florida. We went to Florida because they had no record of my mother’s custody arrangement with my father—an active-duty Senior Master Sergeant in the Kansas Air National Guard. With a lie about custody and the stroke of a pen, my mother was able to sign me over to my now ex-husband. My father didn’t find out until a month later when I told my older sister at Christmas. Despite paying child support, he had no idea his parental rights had been bypassed. I remember the heartbreak in his voice when he realized he had been robbed of the chance to be at my wedding. He didn’t even know the man I had married, and he was terrified for me. All he could do was encourage me to finish high school and go to college—but his rights as a parent had been stripped away. I complied with the marriage because I didn’t think I had another option. I believed I was doing the right thing by my religion, and in my heart, I thought marriage was what I was supposed to do. But the truth is, the decision was never really mine. No one asked me what I wanted. No one considered what this would mean for my future. I wish I could say my 12-year marriage was happy, but it was filled with abuse—towards both myself and my children—as well as infidelity. In 2018, my husband abused me in front of our children and walked out. For the first time in my entire life I was alone. I didn’t know what to do. I was a para at a public school, didn’t have a vehicle, and I lived in rural Kansas. I was left with 4 small children. For six months, we lived on our farm without heat or indoor plumbing. Eventually, I sold our animals and our property. I moved my children to Kansas City to start over. While I’m grateful for my children and the life I’ve rebuilt, I would never wish this experience on anyone else. Under current Missouri law, my marriage at 17 to a 21-year-old would still be legal. That should not be the case. Committee members, sharing this story is deeply painful—but I do it in the hope that one day, no child will have to live what I lived. I do it for my daughters—one of whom is now only a year younger than I was when I was forced to marry. Missouri has the chance to lead. A similar bill has been sitting in the Kansas legislature since 2021. Today, in true border rivalry tradition, you can beat them to the punch—and protect Missouri’s children.



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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>MATTHEW HUFFMAN</b>		PHONE NUMBER: <b>573-634-4161</b>	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: <b>MISSOURI COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE</b>		TITLE: <b>CHIEF PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICER</b>	
ADDRESS: <b>217 OSCAR DR. SUITE A</b>			
CITY: <b>JEFFERSON CITY</b>		STATE: <b>MO</b>	ZIP: <b>65101</b>
EMAIL:	ATTENDANCE:	SUBMIT DATE: <b>4/1/2025 12:00 AM</b>	
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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>MICHELE HANASH</b>		PHONE NUMBER: <b>305-902-8158</b>	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: <b>AHA FOUNDATION</b>		TITLE: <b>DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND WOMEN'S PROGRAMS</b>	
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CITY: <b>BETHESDA</b>		STATE: <b>MD</b>	ZIP: <b>20816</b>
EMAIL: <b>Michele@theahafoundation.org</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>In-Person</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/31/2025 1:17 PM</b>	

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Chair, Vice Chair and Distinguished Committee Members: AHA Foundation wishes to be recorded in strong support of SB66. AHA Foundation thanks the sponsor of this bill for their efforts, and the Committee for prioritizing a hearing on this important legislation. While the current marriage age in Missouri is 18, an alarming legal loophole allows a parent to enter a 16- or 17-year-old into marriage with nothing more than a notarized signature. A 2018 law added a “close in age exception” to the law, which was a step in the right direction, making it so that parents may no longer marry minors off to an adult over the age of 21. However the current loophole in the law remained. SB66 eliminates this remaining dangerous loophole and ends child marriage in Missouri once and for all. Forced marriage in itself is a form of human trafficking leading to sexual exploitation and forced servitude. In addition to this, the marriage-age laws incentivize and legalize the trafficking of minors under the guise of marriage. Federal law does not set a minimum age for spousal or fiancé visas; instead it defers to the law in the state where the couple will reside. Thus Missouri’s current marriage age laws allow and encourage 16- and 17-year-olds to be legally trafficked for their citizenship, forced to marry adults overseas so the adults can get a visa and path to citizenship. Missouri’s laws also allow and encourage individuals to legally traffic 16- and 17-year-olds from overseas to Missouri as their spouse. This is not a small problem. In 2019, the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, then chaired by Senator Ron Johnson, issued a report finding that USCIS approved 8,868 petitions involving minors as young as age 13 for spousal or fiancé entry into the U.S. between 2007 and 2017. The younger party was a girl in 95% of the petitions. Marriage before age 18 creates a nightmarish legal trap. Even the most mature minor faces overwhelming legal and practical barriers if they try to avoid being forced into marriage. Minors, having not yet reached the age of majority, can easily be forced to marry or trapped in an abusive marriage in which they are forced to stay. Because they have not yet reached the legal age of majority, minors face significant legal and practical barriers if they try to leave home, enter a domestic violence shelter, retain an attorney, or file a legal action independently, even one for divorce. Minors being coerced into marriage may fear familial violence should they refuse to comply, or they may be physically or emotionally manipulated into an unwanted marriage. AHA Foundation has worked with victims facing child marriage from across the U.S. and knows full well that these barriers are grounded in reality. The individual stories we have seen are also supported by data: 8,280 minors, one as young as 13, were married in Missouri between 2000 and 2022 – including 282 minors wed between 2019 and 2021, under the new law. Additionally, 78% were girls wed to adult men an average of 3.8 years older. Between 2000 and 2018, at least 910 and possibly as many as 1,299 marriages occurred with a spousal age difference that would have met the definition of a sex crime outside of marriage. Finally, around 88% of the minors who married in Missouri before the 2018 law were aged 16 or 17.

Accordingly, the 2018 law protected only 12% of those it was intended to protect. Marriage before age 18 destroys nearly every aspect of an American girl's life. Child marriage produces devastating lifelong repercussions for her health, education, economic opportunities and physical safety. Some 70% to 80% of marriage before age 18 ends in divorce, which brings additional hardship, instability and dependency. Given these harms, one case of child marriage is one too many. If mechanisms are in place that allow for thousands of cases to slip through the cracks, the common sense solution is to enact the necessary law to close these gaps. Missouri should not participate in child marriage. The solution is simple: eliminate the dangerous loopholes in the marriage laws that place the minors of Missouri at risk of trafficking, exploitation and abuse. AHA Foundation urges you to support, and vote YES to pass, SB66.-----About AHA Foundation AHA Foundation is a 501(c)3 nonprofit founded by women's rights activist Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and is the leading organization working to end honor violence that shames, hurts or kills thousands of women and girls in the U.S. each year, and puts millions more at risk. We ensure that women and girls of all races, cultures, religions, beliefs and backgrounds who are facing honor violence have a way out, and that survivors get the help they need to thrive. Since 2010, the Foundation's programs include: 1) compiling data on these crimes, which are not currently tracked by U.S. law enforcement or government agencies, 2) publishing reports and articles and organizing conferences about the continued oppression of women and girls in the U.S., 3) outreach and education to expand and strengthen state and national legislation for the protection of women and girls, 4) training of law enforcement and service providers, and 5) connecting women and girls in crisis to appropriate services. AHA Foundation has trained over 4,000 frontline service providers on responding to cases of gender based violence, honor violence and forced marriage, and partnered with Crisis Text Line to create America's first honor violence and forced marriage helpline.



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
**WITNESS APPEARANCE FORM**

BILL NUMBER: <b>SB 66</b>		DATE: <b>4/1/2025</b>
COMMITTEE: <b>Children and Families</b>		
<b>TESTIFYING:</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES		
<b>WITNESS NAME</b>		
<b>INDIVIDUAL:</b>		
WITNESS NAME: <b>PRESLEY VAN WAGONER</b>		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE:      ZIP:
EMAIL: <b>laurenvanwagoner@gmail.com</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>In-Person</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/31/2025 5:23 PM</b>
<b>THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.</b>		

Hello, I'm Presley Van Wagoner and I'm 14 years old and a resident of Kansas City, MO. I'm here to discuss the child marriage ban. Growing up, I shouldn't have had to wonder if I would ever get a new dad. I shouldn't have wondered if when he left the house at night he would finally be gone for good. I always knew that my mom and dad were on borrowed time. I spent countless nights in my room, anxious and waiting for my mom to finally feel ready to leave. Now that my mom has started advocating for the child marriage ban, I have come to realize some significant things and learned more about her life. And I can't help but find myself wondering if my mom would have been happier if there had been a law preventing her from entering into a child marriage. Perhaps she would have avoided the physical and mental abuse she suffered at the hands of my father. Senate Bill 66 is a crucial step toward protecting the future of our young men and women. It's imperative to vote for the end of child marriage in Missouri. This is a matter of justice and opportunity for all.





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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>		
<b>BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:</b>		
WITNESS NAME: <b>SHEENA EASTBURN</b>		PHONE NUMBER: <b>417-635-9030</b>
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: <b>UNCHAINED AT LAST</b>		TITLE:
ADDRESS: <b>6412 TIGER RD</b>		
CITY: <b>PIERCE CITY</b>		STATE: <b>MO</b>
		ZIP: <b>65723</b>
EMAIL:	ATTENDANCE:	SUBMIT DATE: <b>4/1/2025 12:00 AM</b>
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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>INDIVIDUAL:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>SHEENA EASTBURN</b>		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:	
ADDRESS:			
CITY:		STATE:	ZIP:
EMAIL: <b>seastburn75@gmail.com</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>Written</b>		SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/28/2025 6:18 PM</b>
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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>		
<b>INDIVIDUAL:</b>		
WITNESS NAME: <b>SUSAN GIBSON</b>		PHONE NUMBER:
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME:		TITLE:
ADDRESS:		
CITY:		STATE:      ZIP:
EMAIL: <b>Onesuegibson@protonmail.com</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>Written</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/31/2025 7:22 PM</b>
<b>THE INFORMATION ON THIS FORM IS PUBLIC RECORD UNDER CHAPTER 610, RSMo.</b>		

**SB 66 is a long overdue bill that must finally be passed for Missouri government to be thought of as having any integrity at all, and to make any credible claim of caring for children. Please advance it out of committee.**



MISSOURI HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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COMMITTEE: <b>Children and Families</b>			
<b>TESTIFYING:</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> IN SUPPORT OF <input type="checkbox"/> IN OPPOSITION TO <input type="checkbox"/> FOR INFORMATIONAL PURPOSES			
<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>VICTORIA ANDERSON</b>		PHONE NUMBER:	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: <b>AMERICAN ATHEISTS</b>		TITLE: <b>STATE POLICY SPECIALIST</b>	
ADDRESS: <b>225 CRISTIANI STREET</b>			
CITY: <b>CRANFORD</b>		STATE: <b>NJ</b>	ZIP: <b>07016</b>
EMAIL: <b>vanderson@atheists.org</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>Written</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/28/2025 1:05 PM</b>	

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Dear Chairperson Jones and Members of the House Children and Families Committee: American Atheists, on behalf of its over 1,400 constituents in Missouri, thanks you for holding a hearing on SB 66, a bill to protect young people by ending child marriage. This bill would protect children from being coerced into marriage against their will, a harmful and archaic practice that happens all too frequently across the country. We urge you to support this necessary legislation. American Atheists is a national civil rights organization that works to achieve religious equality for all Americans by protecting what Thomas Jefferson called the “wall of separation” between government and religion created by the First Amendment. We strive to create an environment where atheists are accepted as members of our nation’s communities and where bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable. We promote understanding of atheists through education, outreach, and community-building, and work to end the stigma associated with being an atheist in America. American Atheists believes that children should never be coerced into marriage, especially due to the religious beliefs of their parents or guardians. Currently, Missouri law allows children as young as sixteen to marry with parental consent, without any further guardrails in place to protect children from forced marriage. This loophole invites abuse and endangers children in Missouri. Over 8,000 children in Missouri were married between 2000 and 2022, with approximately 1,000 marriages in which the age difference between the child and their spouse would otherwise be considered child abuse or statutory rape. This means the current loopholes in state law have allowed criminal conduct against children in Missouri. These loopholes must be closed immediately to prevent further harm. The harm caused by child marriage cannot be understated. Young people who marry before the age of eighteen are significantly more likely to experience disastrous health, education, and economic outcomes and have a heightened risk of experiencing violence. They have a 70- to 80-percent chance of getting divorced, and teen mothers who marry and then divorce are much more likely to end up in poverty than teen mothers who remain single. Even if the marriage does not end in divorce, child brides are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to attend college, and often spend their lives in poverty. Raising the minimum age of marriage to eighteen means that hundreds of children in Missouri will be spared the heartbreaking consequences of child marriage. The fact that a minor’s parent or guardian consents to the marriage does not provide sufficient protection against entering a marriage the child may never be able to leave. In fact, one of the main reasons a child is compelled into marriage is because of parental coercion. Children experiencing teen pregnancy and financial instability, for example, are at risk of being coerced into entering a marriage they do not want by their parents. When this happens, the children face overwhelming legal and practical barriers to escaping the marriage because, as minors, they are unable to access many of the resources that are available to adults, including domestic violence shelters or even retaining a divorce attorney. Simply requiring parental consent is not a

**safeguard against the potentially horrific outcomes associated with child marriage. On the contrary, it provides a legal mechanism for parents and guardians to irreversibly limit the rights of vulnerable children. Enacting SB 66 would close the dangerous loopholes that currently exist and ensure children throughout Missouri can no longer be placed in harm's way. We strongly urge you to advance this bill and protect young people from coerced marriage. Should you have any questions regarding American Atheists' support for SB 66, please contact me at [vanderson@atheists.org](mailto:vanderson@atheists.org). Sincerely, Victoria Anderson**  
**State Policy Specialist American Atheists**



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<b>WITNESS NAME</b>			
<b>BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION:</b>			
WITNESS NAME: <b>CHRISTOPHER WIELGA</b>		PHONE NUMBER: <b>573-315-3893</b>	
BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION NAME: <b>MOST POLICY INITIATIVE</b>		TITLE: <b>LEGISLATIVE FELLOW</b>	
ADDRESS: <b>238 E HIGH ST</b>			
CITY: <b>JEFFERSON CITY</b>		STATE: <b>MO</b>	ZIP: <b>65101</b>
EMAIL: <b>chris@mostpolicyinitiative.org</b>	ATTENDANCE: <b>In-Person</b>	SUBMIT DATE: <b>3/31/2025 3:30 PM</b>	

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Good Morning, Madame Chair and members of the committee, My name is Dr. Christopher Wielga I am a legislative fellow with MOST Policy Initiative. MOST policy initiative is a non-partisan, nonprofit, organization that provides research to the Missouri Legislature. We create short research briefs called Sciences Notes that summarize the research on a topic. MOST has published Science Note on the topic of legal marriage age. My testimony today will highlight some of the content from that note. Nearly every state sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years old. The states that do not are Nebraska where it is 19 and Mississippi where it is 21. However, most states have exceptions to this minimum age. Some common exceptions are: parental consent, consent or approval of a judge, if one party in the marriage is pregnant or has recently given birth, or if the minor is emancipated. In Missouri, the minimum age is 18 years old, however with the consent of a parent or guardian 16 year-old can marry. Those over 21 are prohibited from marrying anyone under 18. In the state in 2022, there were 49 marriages involving people under 18. Marriage timing varies between U.S. regions, cultures, and religions. While there is limited research on cultural justifications for marriage of minors in the United States, being married as a child is more common in the south, among low-income households and among certain groups including Hispanics, and those from conservative Mormon or Protestant religious backgrounds. Nationally, girls are more commonly married as children than boys are. Children, particularly girls, who marry under 18, are more likely than their unmarried peers to experience: lower educational attainment, a higher likelihood of living in poverty as an adult, substance abuse disorders, intimate partner violence, high risk pregnancies, and marriages that are more likely to result in divorce or separation. Thank you for your time. Happy to take any questions.